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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University's adoption of an approach to training packages that equally values the learning journey of its students with the training outcomes. The paper looks at the essential educational design issues, including underpinning knowledge, building generic capabilities, graded assessment, and using student-centered approaches that are responsive to student needs and aspirations. The professional development needed to support the change in teaching approach is also discussed. In addition, an overview is presented of the structural and administrative processes that have been implemented to ensure a quality approach to training packages. Appendixes include two case studies and four figures. (YLB)

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Implementation of training packages at RMIT

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RMIT University has adopted an approach to Training Packages which equally values the learning journey of its students with the training outcomes. This paper will look at the essential educational design issues including underpinning knowledge, building generic capabilities, graded assessment and using student-centred approaches which are responsive to students needs and aspirations. The professional development needed to support the change in teaching approach will also be discussed. In addition, an overview of the structural and administrative processes changes which have been implemented to ensure a quality approach to Training Packages will be presented.

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It has been noted in a range of forums that the flexible capacity of Training Package qualifications has liberated the learning design process so that it is more capable of

- reflecting the needs of particular student cohorts and markets
- customising qualifications to a range of industry and enterprise circumstances
- translating the political and industrial contexts of Training Package development to delivery, planning outcomes and documentation of assessments
- providing multiple interpretations of course structures within the same qualification
- amplifying the underpinning knowledge and generic capabilities
- providing multiple reporting formats for a range of pathway outcomes to meet organisational and student requirements, eg the need to be able to provide competency statements for employment purposes and graded assessments for articulation purposes.

RMIT's response to the introduction of Training Packages as the specification of endorsed vocational education and training (VET) outcomes and qualifications has been based on an analysis of:

- the form and function of training packages and the changes in practice that are indicated;
- the professional needs of RMIT teaching and support staff to implement this change; and
- our obligation to our students to provide them with an educationally sound and vocationally relevant learning program

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The approach to the implementation of Training Packages which RMIT University has adopted is one which places equal value on both the learning journey of the students and their vocational outcomes. It recognises that whilst Training Packages specify the outcomes to be achieved and the rules for awarding national qualifications, it is at the RTO level that the learning curriculum must be developed. This gives the partners in the training process roles which are commensurate with their particular expertise. Industry representatives define the competencies which particular industries need and VET teachers and trainers design and develop learning paths through which industry needs are met.

As a dual sector tertiary provider, RMIT has developed a Teaching and Learning (T&L) strategy to ensure that the learning needs of its students are met. This strategy places emphasis on both the learning journey and the learning outcomes. The authors of this paper believe the process put in place to ensure quality teaching and learning in Training Package programs is not only consistent with the RMIT T&L strategy but also represents good practice in the implementation of Training Packages. Reflecting on the authors' experience, this paper provides a very short case study of RMIT practice.

Implementation plan

The RMIT process is built around the development of an Implementation Plan. This process enables the program team to design the learning paths for particular groups of students and to ensure that the appropriate learning and administrative support mechanisms are in place before enrolment forms are issued and learning begins. This means that there is, necessarily, some lead-in time between the release of a Training Package at the state level and the commencement of delivery. This runs counter to bureaucratic demands for immediacy of response. However, faster and better are not necessarily synonymous and we believe that our leading edge will come from the quality of teaching and learning at RMIT. Whilst being first to offer a program may give some market advantage, it is satisfied clients who will seek return business.

The design of learning pathways and programs requires a level of educational expertise which many of our staff do not possess. This is not surprising given the emphasis over the last 10+ years on the provision of nationally developed learning resource packages which have been used as pseudo-curriculum documents by the majority of VET practitioners. It has, therefore, been recognised that the implementation of Training Packages must be viewed as a process of staff development and capacity building as much as that of educational planning and design.

Thus the development of an Implementation Plan is a process through which program teams are supported by a mentor to:

- identify their educational aims (capacities and competencies) given the particular group of students they are preparing to work with
- understand the agency and affordances of both the RMIT and student learning environments which need to be utilised to achieve these ends

- identify Units of Competency (UoCs) to be undertaken and design a suitable learning pathway to achieve them
- develop overall learning and assessment strategies at the program level
- develop at the learning unit level:
    - an agreed pedagogical approach
    - learning and assessment strategies and tasks
    - learning and assessment matrices
    - a diagnostic instrument for case study assessment
- ensure that all appropriate educational, marketing and administrative planning has been undertaken and appropriate mechanisms are in place to support both the students and the learning programs.

Underpinning the Implementation Plan process is an approach to program design and development which is illustrated in Figure 1. Clearly the development of an Implementation Plan does not cover the whole of this process. Instead, at the point of implementation, the Implementation Plan transforms into the Program Log and is used to collect and collate all information about the program, its administration, student feedback, progressive improvements, etc. The Program Log and regular discussion with the program industry advisory committee provides a mechanism on which both continuous and quantum program improvement processes are based.

The entire process sits within the wider RMIT Educational Quality Assurance (EQA) and Program Renewal policies, processes and procedures which cover all programs (TAFE and higher education) within RMIT.

Understanding learning and Training Packages

> You cannot teach anyone anything. You have to let them discover it for themselves. (Gallileo 1659, cited by Cantrell 2000)

The UoCs have been written on the basis of industry input and are organised to reflect job functions. They are also based on an understanding of informal workplace learning rather than formal institutional learning. Learning in the workplace is necessarily holistic, as different job functions impact on each other and the workplace context provides inherent consolidation and cohesion which is not necessarily present within institutional learning.

At RMIT, we have recognised the need to unpack and repack UoCs into Learning Units (LUs). Such learning units may contain the formative learning for a number of UoCs to both avoid unnecessary duplication and to provide a learning pathway which recognises many of the complexities embedded within Training Packages. The LUs are then organised into an appropriate learning pathway and mapped onto the appropriate UoCs. This is illustrated by Figure 2.

The LUs are graded on the basis of the quality of the students learning, whereas UoCs are assessed against the endorsed performance criteria and recorded as either 'competent' or 'not yet competent'. The LUs within a qualification are also used to

negotiate articulation pathways into higher education programs on the basis of the developed curriculum.

Whilst this approach has been agreed to by the Office of PETE, there are some outstanding problems within the National Centre for Vocational Education and Training (NCVER) audit requirements which we are addressing through the development of an initial assessment instrument for each LU. This will also provide us with diagnostic information about a student's current understanding and capacity for learning.

Designing the learning pathway

The use of learning units enables RMIT staff to design into their programs many of the problematic issues which are facing vocational education and training practitioners. In particular, they enable us to:

- adopt a holistic approach to learning within Training Package programs
- group UoCs in order to manage SCHs more effectively
- integrate the key competencies within our students' learning
- emphasise application of key skills over time
- enable reflection and consolidation to be built into our programs
- enable teachers to use active learning techniques to develop a student's capacity to learn from action
- allow for assessment which is based on a student's responses to contingent as well as routine situations
- address underpinning or embedded knowledge as 'knowledge in action' rather than an artificial division into theory and practice
- promote an approach to learning which starts with practice and builds understanding around it.

The three case studies at the conclusion of this paper show how some of these aims have been achieved.

Administering Training Packages

Administration systems facilitate reporting the requirements of a range of stakeholders such as

- reporting formal performance to government bodies (ie AVETMIS)
- reporting compliance to funding bodies
- monitoring reports based on learning pathways by organisational users
- providing learning completion and assessment outcome reports to students and employers.

At RMIT, these systems have been developed to be intelligent and to reflect the learning approaches documented within Implementation Plans.

Conventional administration systems reflect corporate imperatives to report performance against a set of standardised products designed for a relatively stable market. They respond to a controlled view of education that compartmentalises and disassociates administration from delivery. In the era of Training Packages, there is a revolution underway and an explosion of creativity in the design and structuring of qualifications and associated learning pathways. It is no longer appropriate nor productive to continue to marginalise and separate the institutional administration of learning from the business of learning.

The development of new administration systems at RMIT has required a 'whole-of-organisation' approach to bring a range of organisational intelligences together, such as computer functionality, database construction, systems design and course structure design. Cross-organisational forums that progress professional understandings of the constraints and contexts of administration and delivery are important as well as the development of common definitions of concepts such as competencies and understandings of computer functionality. The resulting systems are integrated, flexible, useable and student-centred. For example, at RMIT, in developing flexible learning pathways for a range of students, we have identified several ways of defining the learning pathway with varying sequences of learning units. These LUs group several UoCs and/or splinter other UoCs across several LUs.

Such LUs constitute the basis of enrolment at RMIT and the database we use is able to provide information of enrolment and completion at both the LU and the UoC level. On completion of a Training Package program, students will receive:

- a testament of the appropriate qualification
- a statement of UoCs achieved
- an academic statement with graded assessment results for each LU undertaken.

As a consequence, the administration system is complex and capable of recording and reporting against multiple data fields, such as

- student enrolment in learning packages and related units of competency
- registration of multiple interpretations of qualification structures
- information on the unit(s) of competency as well as the learning package, including partial UoCs, underpinning knowledge and assessment requirements
- completions against learning packages
- progress towards or completion of UoCs using recognised codes
- transcript of results listing learning packages, units of competencies, grades and competency
- nationally recognised credentials, listing competencies achieved.

Conclusion

Obviously, the RMIT process is still in its infancy. Implementation Plans for over 100 programs have been prepared to date and these are now being implemented. Ongoing revisions and improvements are being made as problems and issues arise and are addressed. A similar number of Implementation Plans are expected to be developed this year for implementation in 2002.

Whilst it is essential that the vocational education and training RMIT delivers within a Training Package program is educationally sound and reproduces the conditions for good learning, it is equally important that there is cohesion between the educational and administrative processes of the university.

Where proactive dialogue is constructed between the two operational areas (administration and delivery), a greater understanding of the challenges of implementing Training Packages is evidenced. The discrepancies between the ordering of learning, methods of delivery, content and the structure of national qualifications are complex. Cooperative approaches to implementing Training Packages should prove effective over the longer term, but up to now have generally been circumvented by the administrative imperative to log new qualifications on databases to enable forthcoming enrolments.

In order to ensure that there is more synergy between administration and delivery and to maximise the flexibility of Training Packages, it is essential that organisations create cross-organisation planning forums aimed at fostering a whole-of-organisation approach to the implementation of Training Packages. The move towards affecting quality recording and reporting to all stakeholders in the VET system is critically dependent upon opportunities for teachers to plan and create educationally sound qualification structures collaboratively with administrators who are designing systems based on sound educational frameworks.

Only through this synergy will we be able to ensure that the learning and assessment outcomes of Training Package qualifications

- are student centred
- are flexibly structured to support a variety of learner needs
- meet the assessment and qualification requirements of Training Packages
- are based on robust pedagogical understandings
- provide consistency of assessment
- are informed by and inform quality processes
- support and enhance professional practice
- provide for multiple reporting formats for a range of audiences and intentions.

References

Cantrell A (2001) Unpublished notes from a seminar on Learning to Learn, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Victoria, 27 February.

Appendix 1 – Case studies

Case study 1

Mary and Josefa approached the task of implementing the CSH Training Packages with a number of reservations. The programs they coordinated were mainly directed towards adults returning to study and were at Certificate III and IV level. They saw their role predominantly as inducting their students into the context and culture of the industry, so that they could operate within the ethics, mores, attitudes and codes of practice which typify the social and community services of practice.

Thus, they felt that the apparent concentration within Training Packages on standards of practice would diminish the access of their students to the body of theory in which such ethics, attitudes etc were embedded. They were also being faced with other concomitant changes and pressures such as reduced funding, a greater proportion of sessional staff to full-time staff, introduction of courses at lower AQF levels, workplace learning etc.

However, they had the advantage of being mentored by one of the writers of part of the CSH package, as well as the RMIT infrastructure which recognised that the implementation of Training Packages involved a great deal of educational planning to identify learning paths, learning and assessment strategies, and associated processes. They had also been marginally involved in an OTFE toolbox project which had enabled them to start a learning journey to investigate and integrate different learning and assessment processes and strategies.

They thus began the process of unpacking the Training Package and repacking it in a way which would meet the needs of their different groups of students. This included coming to grips with the idea that learning strategies and approaches would be quite different for those without experience of the work context to those currently working within it. This was not an easy process as they, and their colleagues, had to question and reformulate many of their basic educational assumptions and to accept that teaching and learning would require far greater planning and flexibility than they had become accustomed to with national resource and curriculum provision.

The implementation plans which they prepared were therefore the focus of much stress, uncertainty, anger and challenge, as people came to grips with the change processes implicit in Training Packages, each of them undertaking, at differing rates, a learning journey with respect to the change.

Gradually their attitudes changed as Training Packages started to be viewed as opportunities rather than straightjackets. They realised that part of the process was to identify the UPK necessary if learners were to achieve the UoC and then to map out a learning path which enabled their students to access and integrate the appropriate knowledge within the context of skill development.

Suddenly, they were flying – seeing Training Packages as a vehicle for change. They started seeing workbased training as a much richer learning environment than a 'one style fits all' process of classroom delivery. They realised that Training Packages were a useful tool to facilitate the development of industry links and partnerships, and that practical placement was a vehicle for learning rather than simply for

'practising' what had been learned in the classroom, and repositioning assessment as an integral part of skill development and recognition rather than just the end of a training process. They have also moved to a view of assessment as the development of an evidence portfolio rather than a one-off test or demonstration of skill and a recognition that the achievement of the same outcome can be measured in a variety of ways. The introduction of Training Package programs delivered with a workbased focus has also led to greater employment of their students, most of whom are being offered jobs before they have completed their course.

Mary, Josefa and their colleagues have recently been awarded an NTEU Commendation from the Institutional Quality and Planning Unit in recognition of the quality of their educational planning and the excellence of their quality management.

Case study 2

One program team has developed its learning units in such a way as to enable an additional learning unit called 'Program Overview' to be included. This learning unit provides for fortnightly review sessions in which the students meet to reflect on their learning and to identify and consolidate the linkages between the other concurrent learning units they are undertaking.

This unit is intended to help the students develop the capacity for autonomous and self-directed learning. It is also expected that it will help the students understand the connectedness and workplace applications of their learning and to develop the necessary capabilities for dealing with contingencies and sharing understandings with others.

The same program team were able to use the learning unit structure to develop an integrated approach to communication skills which entailed students going out to industry enterprises to talk to staff and, from the information collected, write reports and develop presentations about issues of concern to these enterprises.

Case study 3

Almost all programs have UoCs relating to Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S). In most cases, these units are part of the core competencies and as such are delivered early in the program of learning. By constructing the learning units appropriately, our program teams are able to introduce OH&S concepts early in the learning program, yet refrain from signing off the UoC until the students have demonstrated that they can apply these concepts in subsequent units.

This approach has also been used with UoCs concerned with communication and interpersonal skills, group work, management skills and information technology.

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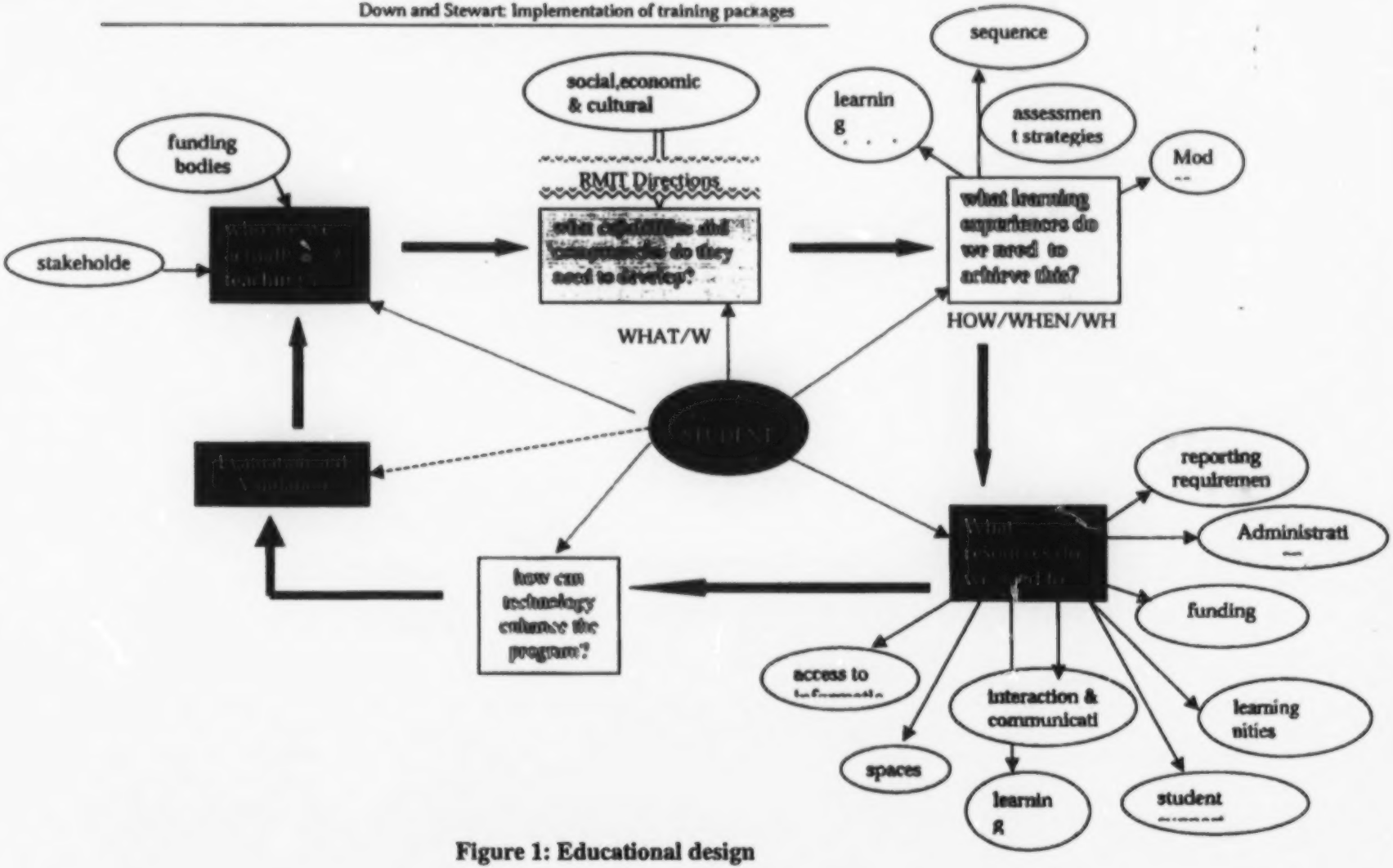

Figure 1: Educational design

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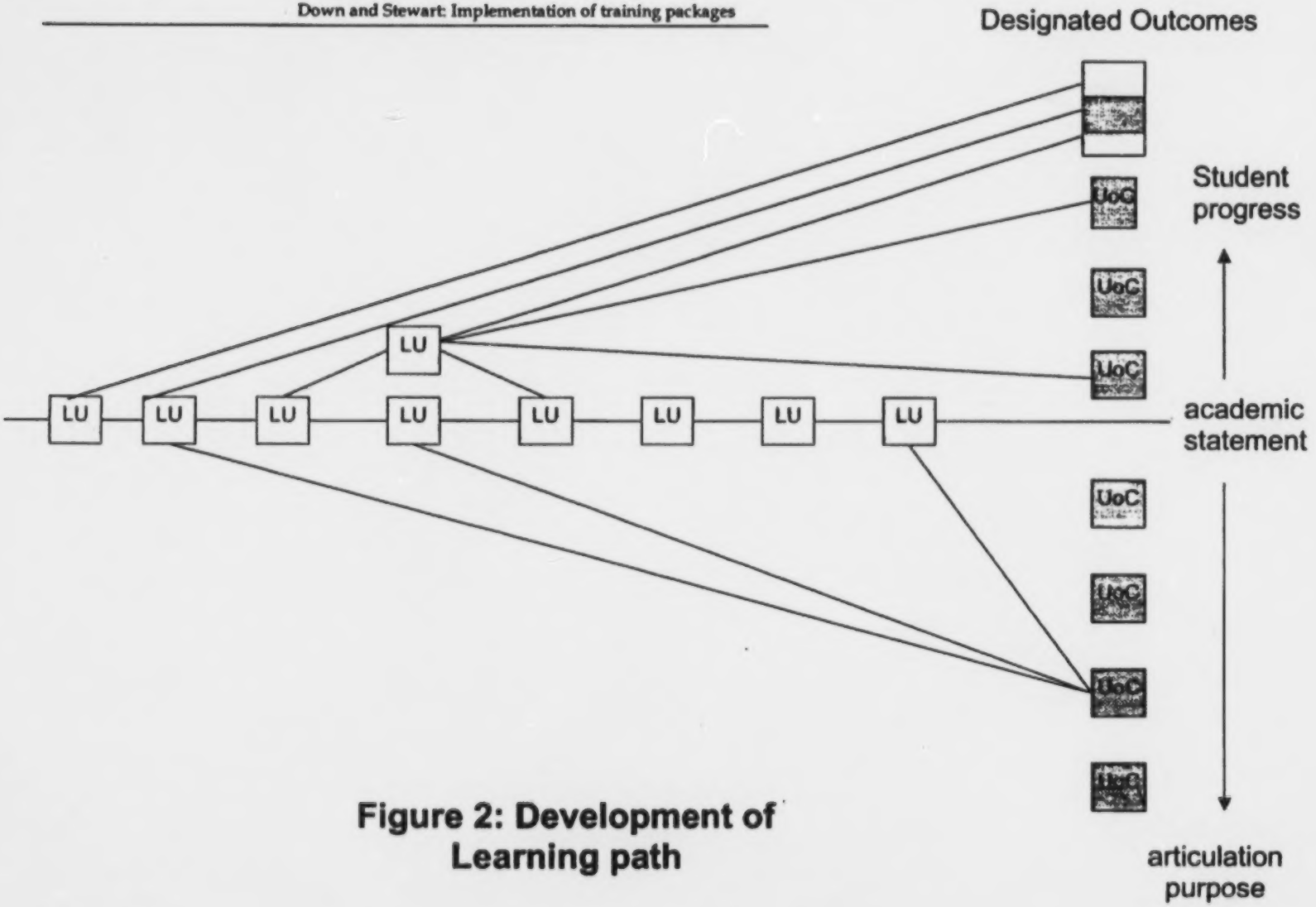

Figure 2: Development of Learning path

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Figure 3: Conventional administration and learning system development

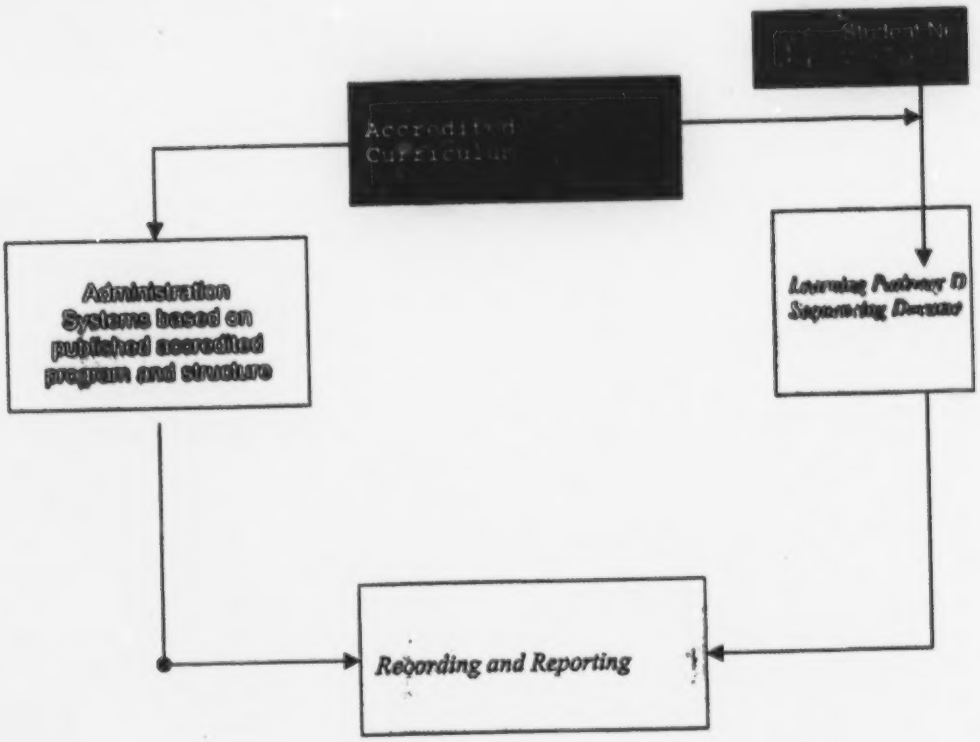
Accredited Curriculum
Administration Systems based on published accredited program and structure
Recording and Reporting

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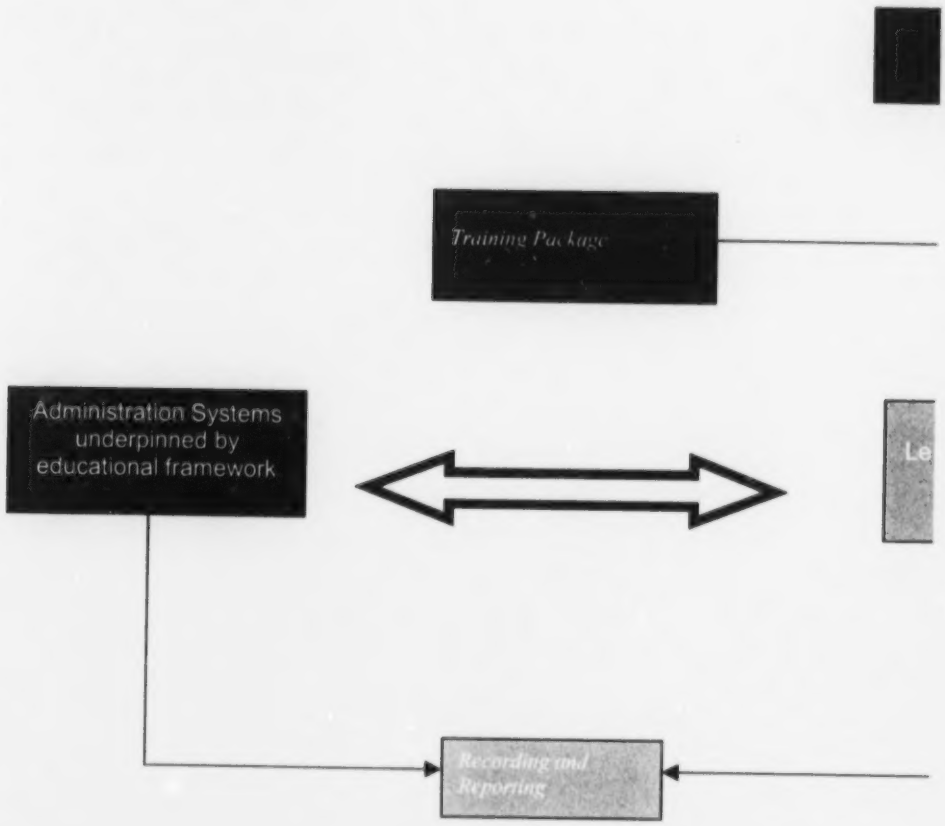
Figure 4: Reformed approach to administration and learning system development



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